V2 no 4

Unitarian Horizons

December 15, 1938

PLAIN MEN OF MODERATE ABILITIES

IN the preface to the "Everyman" edition of the Chronicles of the Pilgrim Fathers, John Masefield wrote, "The pilgrims leave no impression of personality on the mind. They were not 'remarkable'. Not one of them had compelling personal genius, or marked talent for the work in hand. They were plain men of moderate abilities, who, giving up all things, went to live

in the wilds, at unknown cost to themselves, in order to preserve to their children a life in the soul."

Maybe so. But these men who were not "remarkable" did some very remarkable things; these plain men of no extraordinary gifts—without even marked talent for the work in hand—did achieve an extraordinary result. In the light of their great accomplishment, it is easy to take for granted that they must have been men of genius; and it is useful to have it pointed out to us that they were not. It is reassuring and deeply encouraging to be reminded that one of the permanently significant enterprises of all time was carried through by "plain men of moderate abilities."

THE FABRIC OF THE WORLD

I DO not intend to underestimate the part which genius plays in human progress, nor to disparage the men and women of more than moderate talents. Martin Luther and John Calvin, Hugh Latimer and Richard Hooker, John Milton and Oliver Cromwell—these are men who made a real impression of personality upon their times and upon all subsequent history, and it would be absurd to deny the influence of their compelling personal genius. There is a kind of perverted respect for ordinary people that refuses to see the presence of superiority, that gives all the credit

to the so-called average man and willfully ignores the man who is above that level. Few forms of snobbishness are more stupid or more objectionable.

But the point I wish to make—and I think it is what John Masefield had in mind as he wrote about the pilgrims—is that the solid, constructive work of building the fabric of civilization is very largely done by men who have no claim to superior abilities. What makes them valuable is not their abilities but their devotion. They have no touch of genius; but they have ideals, and they are prepared to work for those ideals at unknown cost to themselves. When they see something of surpassing value, they do not hesitate to give up everything else—even going to live in the wilds—in order to win or preserve it. It is of this kind of men that the Son of Sirach wrote, more than two thousand years ago:

"Yet without these shall not a city be inhabited,
Nor shall men sojourn or walk up and down
therein.
For these maintain the fabric of the world"

and it is well to remember that he included the smith, the potter, the engraver of signets, along with the physician and the judge and the scribe, in the category of "famous men." They may not be "remarkable," but they should not be forgotten.

THE FABRIC OF CHURCHES

NOW churches are like cities in this respect, that their very life depends upon the devotion of those who belong in this honorable company of plain men of moderate abilities and genuine idealism. Religion has had its full share of surpassing genius, and the long line of prophets is the glory of Israel and Christendom; but it seldom happens that the prophet is also a builder, and churches are buildings—made with hands. Some years ago I heard Kirsopp Lake, talking to a group of theological students, say that "the prophet is an indispensable factor in religion, but the place for him is in the desert, not in the pulpit of a parish church." That is a hard saying, and it doesn't quite cover the whole matter; but it is in large measure true, nevertheless.

My present line of duty confers upon me the happy privilege of a series of visits to parish churches. I have seen churches in many parts of the country, and churches of a very wide variety. The strongest impression that I have received has been that of the central importance of plain devotion, by men and women who have no pretensions to genius or any other special distinction, but who care a very great deal about maintaining the fabric of organized religion in order to preserve to themselves and their families "a life in

the soul." They are the spiritual descendants of the Pilgrim Fathers, and they are the real substance of our free churches. There may be a man of unusual ability in the pulpit, or there may not—just as there may be among them a man of considerable wealth, or not. Those are matters of detail. What counts is not the extraordinary or accidental, but the plain loyalty of minister and people to a common purpose, which expresses itself in terms of hard, patient, loving work for maintaining the fabric of the church.

LEST WE BE MISLED

IT would be well for us all, I think, to examine again our basic philosophy as to what constitutes a church and what makes a "successful" church. Just now it is too much the fashion to think in terms of "great" preaching, and of "leading" laymen, and to use this sort of thinking as a very convenient excuse for our own shortcomings. I sometimes hear church people say, "What we need in this church is a young, dynamic preacher who will win a large following and make his personality a force in the community." Or else, "We used to have half a dozen of the most important men of this city in our church and on our Board of Trustees, but they have all died, and their children married Episcopalians." The degree of self-control necessary to meet such

remarks with reasonable courtesy is considerable. The temptation to say "Rubbish" is exceedingly great.

For of course a church is something infinitely greater than the preaching of dynamic young ministers or the adherence of prominent and influential citizens. Much more important is a clear sense of the inherent dignity of honest worship and the plain worth of an ideal that requires a man's whole-souled allegiance. A little granite in the souls of the people is of more value than any amount of magnetic preaching, and a real concern for the life of the spirit is more to be desired than any amount of prestige or publicity. We can let ourselves be woefully misled by the false prophets of the market-place. After all, there is a fundamental difference between a church and even a highly successful department store or country club. On this point, the plain men of moderate abilities are more apt to be sound than those who think more highly of themselves.

WHEN CHRISTMAS COMES

"I HAVE always thought of Christmas-time," said Scrooge's nephew, "when it has come round—apart from the veneration due to its sacred name and origin, if anything belonging to it can be apart from that—as a good time; a kind, forgiving, charitable, pleasant time; the

only time I know of, in the long calendar of the year, when men and women seem by one consent to open their shut-up hearts freely. . . ." There is no time when it is easier to think clearly about the real reason for a church than when Christmas is approaching, and these words from Charles Dickens seem to me the perfect text for that purpose—especially the parenthetical clause.

Churches exist, it seems to me, to make us realize that nothing of real value in our human experience can be apart from the few fundamental truths which religion has taught us to hold sacred. We formulate those truths in various phrases; we differ among ourselves as to the best way to express the mood of veneration which they stir within our hearts; but we all agree that they are of first importance, and that they ought to control our conduct. We agree, too, in acknowledging that it is very easy to forget them, and that when we look back at our own lives and "balance our books" there are a great many items "through a round dozen of months presented dead against us"—to borrow another figure of speech, this time from Scrooge himself.

Well, as I said, churches exist to make us aware of this fact, and to help us carry on with undiminished courage in the long struggle to live as we know in our hearts we should—and can. And at Christmas time this power of the churches is

multiplied by all the tender, imaginative, gracious poetry of the story of the Child of Bethlehem. It was in a stable that Jesus was born. It was the shepherds who came with haste to welcome him. And when he was become a man, it was the common people who heard him gladly. On the day when we celebrate his birth, the deep inner meaning of our church becomes unmistakably plain, and its power to help and to heal beyond question.

F. M. E.

Volume II UNITARIAN HORIZONS Number 4

Published by The Beacon Press, Inc. on the fifteenth day of each month from September to June inclusive.

AMERICAN UNITARIAN ASSOCIATION
25 Beacon Street, Boston, Mass.
FREDERICK M. ELIOT, *President* PARKER E. MARRAN, *Treasurer*

Printed in the U. S. A.